

A WAR FOR SMALL NATIONALITIES: THE GREAT WAR,  
NATIONALISM, AND THE IRISH CONSCRIPTION  
CRISIS OF 1918

by

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the course of World War I, the Irish regiments that fought on the front lines were staffed only with volunteers. Though Britain had extended conscription within the United Kingdom and to its other colonies, Ireland was exempt from drafting soldiers for the war effort. Though the idea of conscripting the Irish had been discussed on multiple occasions within the House of Commons, the motion was always rejected due to the volatile relationship between the two countries. Besides, nearly 200,000 Irishmen volunteered throughout the course of the war.

By 1918, things had changed dramatically. The British and Allied forces had lost ground to the advancing Germans, heavy casualties were sustained on both sides, and the British were finding it increasingly difficult to find manpower. In April of 1918 the idea of Irish conscription was revisited, this time with overwhelming support in the House of Commons, and the motion passed with a staggering majority. In addition, Prime Minister David Lloyd George included a provision in the bill to make Irish Home Rule conditional on conscription. The Irish Conscription Crisis defined the next couple of months in Ireland. The Irish Conscription Crisis featured widespread protests, strikes, and increased feelings of alienation from Britain.

This thesis focuses on the Conscription Crisis of 1918 as a window into the complex relationship between Britain, Ireland, and the different political factions within Ireland that were polarized by extension of conscription to Ireland. First, the thesis

examines the historical spatial separation of Ulster and the southern counties, the creation of difference, and the development of national consciousness in the south. Secondly, the thesis explores the years leading up to the Conscription Crisis and examines the tactics used by the British to recruit the Irish for the war effort and the notion of volunteerism within Irish regiments. Finally, the thesis demonstrates that the protests surrounding the Conscription Crisis in both the southern counties and in Ulster were not merely demonstrations against the forcible taking of men for the war effort. In fact, the protests were themselves manifestations of nationalism and antinationalism in a country that was on the eve of revolution.

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## INTRODUCTION

And now he sang for these ruined men, these doomed listeners, these wretched fools of men come out to fight a war without a country to their name, the slaves of England, the kings of nothing.

—Sebastian Barry, *A Long, Long Way*<sup>1</sup>

“Recruiting in Ireland was killed for party purposes in order to kill Home Rule or self-government for Ireland,” Mr. C. Owens claimed in a meeting with the Navan Guardians in response to the prospect of the enactment of Irish conscription in spring of 1918. Britain, he argued, “would prefer to lose the war with Germany than give liberty to this country.”<sup>2</sup> Owens suggested that the Irish should protest conscription and resist at any cost because “we might as well die here as any other place.”<sup>3</sup> Although Britain had enacted conscription within the United Kingdom and its colonies in 1916, Ireland had been exempt from drafting soldiers for the war effort due to the volatile relationship between the two countries. Nevertheless, nearly 200,000 Irishmen volunteered throughout the course of the war, but by 1918, things had changed dramatically. The British and Allied forces had lost ground to the advancing Germans, heavy casualties were sustained on both sides, and the British were finding it increasingly difficult to find manpower.<sup>4</sup> In April of 1918, the idea of Irish conscription was revisited, this time

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Barry, *A Long, Long Way* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> “A People Who Will Never Be Coerced...,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 13, 1918.

<sup>3</sup> “A People Who Will Never Be Coerced...,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 13, 1918.

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Gregory, “The Decision to Conscript the Irish,” in *Ireland and the Great War: A War to Unite Us All?*, eds. Adrian Gregory and Senia Paseta (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 113.



with overwhelming support in the House of Commons, and the motion passed with a staggering majority.

This Irish conscription bill included a provision for Home Rule, promising a measure of self-governance to Ireland after the war that was conditional on their conscription. This provoked widespread resistance within Ireland that crossed political, religious, and social lines, leading to what historians have termed “the Irish Conscription Crisis.” This crisis featured widespread protests, strikes, and increased feelings of alienation from Britain among diverse communities in Ireland. It enraged Nationalists and Republicans (predominantly in the South) who viewed it as another form of oppression handed down by the British. But, significantly, it also angered Unionists (predominantly in the North) who felt that the provision that guaranteed Home Rule would put them at the mercy of the more populous Nationalists and Catholics of the South. Hence the old Unionist adage, “Home Rule is Rome Rule.”<sup>5</sup>

Many historians have treated the Irish Conscription Crisis as a minor incident in a long chain of events that led to the Anglo-Irish War. Other more prominent events such as the Easter Rising, the Home Rule Crisis, and the General Election of 1918 tend to take precedence over the relatively brief, failed attempt by the British to conscript the Irish. The Conscription Crisis, which lasted only a few months and passed with hardly any bloodshed, has taken a back seat in histories of the Anglo-Irish relationship to other more watershed moments of the Irish Revolution. However, some historians consider the Crisis an important event and connect it to the larger events that led to Irish independence. For example, Thomas Hennessy relates the protests surrounding

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence J. McCaffrey, “Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism: A Study in Cultural Identity,” *Church History*, 42, no. 4 (December 1973): 524–534.

conscription to the growing distrust of the words of British politicians and (like historian Caoimhe Nic Dhaibheid) demonstrates that in the months following the Crisis membership of the radical Republican Party Sinn Fein doubled.<sup>6</sup> Peter Hart links the Crisis to a jump in the membership of the IRA.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Tom Bowden suggests that the Crisis had the effect of polarizing political factions in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Others, such as Deirdre Lindsay, argue that the Conscription Crisis led to a greater prominence of the Irish Labour Party in the South as they were chiefly responsible for massive strikes and resistance rallies, which alienated them from their support base in Ulster.<sup>9</sup>

Aside from the effect that the Crisis had on Irish political parties and radical groups, historians have also placed the Irish Conscription Crisis in the context of British politics and the European war effort. Alan J. Ward blames the blunders of the Conscription Crisis on Prime Minister David Lloyd George, whom he claims, “failed to control, understand, or inform himself about Ireland.”<sup>10</sup> Adrian Gregory and John McEwen suggest that perhaps Lloyd George had no intention of ever enforcing conscription in Ireland and only enacted it to quell the growing pressure from the British public.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Gregory implies that this could have also been a way for

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1998), 220–228; Caoimhe Nic Dhaibheid, “The Irish National Aid Association and the Radicalization of Public Opinion in Ireland 1916–1918,” *The Historical Journal*, 55, no. 3 (September 2012): 706.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hart, “The Social Structure of the Irish Republican Army 1916–1923,” *The Historical Journal* 42, No. 1 (March 1999): 219.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Bowden, “The Irish Underground and the War of Independence 1919–1921,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 8, no. 2 (April 1973), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Dierdre Lindsay, “Labour Against Conscription,” in *Ireland and the First World War*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Co. Westmeath, Ireland: The Liliput Press, 1988), 77–89.

<sup>10</sup> Alan J Ward, “Lloyd George and the 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis,” *The Historical Journal* 17, No. 1 (March 1974): 107.

<sup>11</sup> John McEwen, “The Liberal Party and the Irish Question During World War I,” *Journal of British Studies* 12, no. 1 (November 1972): 109–131; Adrian Gregory, “The Decision to Conscript the Irish,” in *Ireland and the Great War: A War to Unite Us All?*, eds. Adrian Gregory and Senia Paseta (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 128–129.

Lloyd George to rid himself of the “Irish Question.”<sup>12</sup> There are also claims that Lloyd George acted in response to the depletion of troops on the front lines and pressure from outside forces such as France to replenish these forces.<sup>13</sup>

In each of these cases, historians have linked the Conscription Crisis to the larger narratives of World War I. In Irish Revolutionary History, the Crisis contributed to the radicalization of political thought and the abandonment of the campaign for a Home Rule Parliament. In Britain, the Crisis is linked to the desperation surrounding manpower needs and the growing public outcry for more troops in addition to the failures of Lloyd George to understand the political climate of Ireland. The Conscription Crisis thus provides a window into the complex relations amongst different political factions in Ireland and into their disparate relationships to Britain at a critical moment. Furthermore, the Conscription Crisis emphasizes levels of mistrust and misreading of relations within the United Kingdom in addition to the fissures between multiple groups in Ireland and Britain that help to explain the violence of the 1920s, rather than take it as a given.

This thesis will examine the Conscription Crisis of 1918 and the events that led up to it in the context of the growing Nationalist movement in Ireland. First, it will examine the historical spatial separation of Ulster and the southern counties, the creation of difference, and the development of national consciousness in the south. Secondly, it will explore the years leading up to the Conscription Crisis, examine the tactics used by the British to recruit the Irish for the war effort, and the notion of volunteerism within Irish regiments. Finally, it will demonstrate that the protests

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory, 128–129.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Greenhalgh, “David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and the 1918 Manpower Crisis,” *The Historical Journal* 50, No. 2 (June 2007): 397–421.

surrounding the Conscription Crisis in both the southern counties and in Ulster were not merely demonstrations against the forcible taking of men for the war effort. In fact, the protests were themselves part of wider Nationalist debates in a country that was on the eve of revolution.

This thesis argues that historians have largely diminished the Conscription Crisis because it was a failed attempt by the British to force enlistment of Irish soldiers in the British army. The decision not to enforce conscription after the passage of the Military Service Bill meant that the Crisis passed with little conflict or bloodshed. In Ireland, however, the damage had been done: the Home Rule movement was killed and the idea of complete separation from Britain gained momentum. I argue that the importance of the Conscription Crisis lies in the effect it had on the Irish Nationalist movement and the already stressed Anglo-Irish relations. Throughout the Crisis, the Nationalist factions within Ireland unified under a Sinn Fein banner as it became evident that the Irish Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons would never make self-determination a reality through political channels. Ultimately, the Conscription Crisis was the final sign that the relationship between Ireland and Britain was damaged beyond repair.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIFFERENCE AND THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

In many ways Ireland was different from Britain's other colonies. Ireland was Britain's first colony and was thus a testing ground for their rule. One main difference from other colonies was that the Irish were Europeans; however, the British did not always see the Irish as white. In order to legitimize rule, the British needed to demonstrate that the Irish were different and inferior to themselves and therefore needed to be colonized. Bruce Nelson has argued that, "in recent years scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines have noted that for the architects of empire, the process of identity formation seems to require the creation, and demonization, of a colonized Other whose vices serve to highlight the virtues of the colonizer."<sup>14</sup> The British then needed to show that not only were the Irish different than themselves, but also inferior to them in every way. This led to a process that scholars have termed, "the racialization of the Irish—the reduction of a culturally and biologically diverse people to a monolithic whole and the designation of their racial or national characteristics as the antithesis of Anglo-Saxon virtue."<sup>15</sup> Therefore throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stereotypes of the Irish as lazy, ignorant drunkards emerged and were perpetuated. Perhaps the most egregious of these were the depictions of the Irish as having simian

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

and Negro features, reducing the Irish to what the British thought was a primitive race. Vincent Cheng has noted that, “these racial stereotypes create comfortably, securely, clearly defined boundaries between the Self and the Other... This construction of a universal primitivism creates a clearly demarcated Us/Them binarity and difference which functions to reify the dominant Western culture’s sense of itself as civilized and rational by contrast.”<sup>16</sup> By this rationale, the British not only had the right to rule, but rather a duty to civilize the “primitive” races. The image below (Figure 1) depicts the Irish as black Africans showing an Irishman sitting on an overturned basin with a club under his arm and a kettle for a hat; next to him is an empty bottle lying on the ground outside of a dilapidated shack. The title of the image is “The King of A-Shantee,” a pun on the African Ashanti people and the shanty shack depicted in the image. Both the man and his wife have apelike features, wide noses, large mouths with big lips, and a prominent brow. This image was meant to show the Irish as not having evolved as far as the British and puts them in the same category as the negative racial characterizations of black Africans that circulated throughout the nineteenth century. In addition, as Cheng noted, the depiction of the couple in the image suggests that they may be the missing link in the evolution between apes and black Africans.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the primitivism associated with Africa, the racialization of the Irish sought to depict them as brutal and violent savages. This was accomplished by equating Fenianism, the violent Irish Nationalist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, with brutish, monstrous savagery. L. Perry Curtis has argued that, “since the Fenians were treated in British newspapers as little better than thugs bent on murder and

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<sup>16</sup> Vincent Cheng, *Joyce, Race, and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

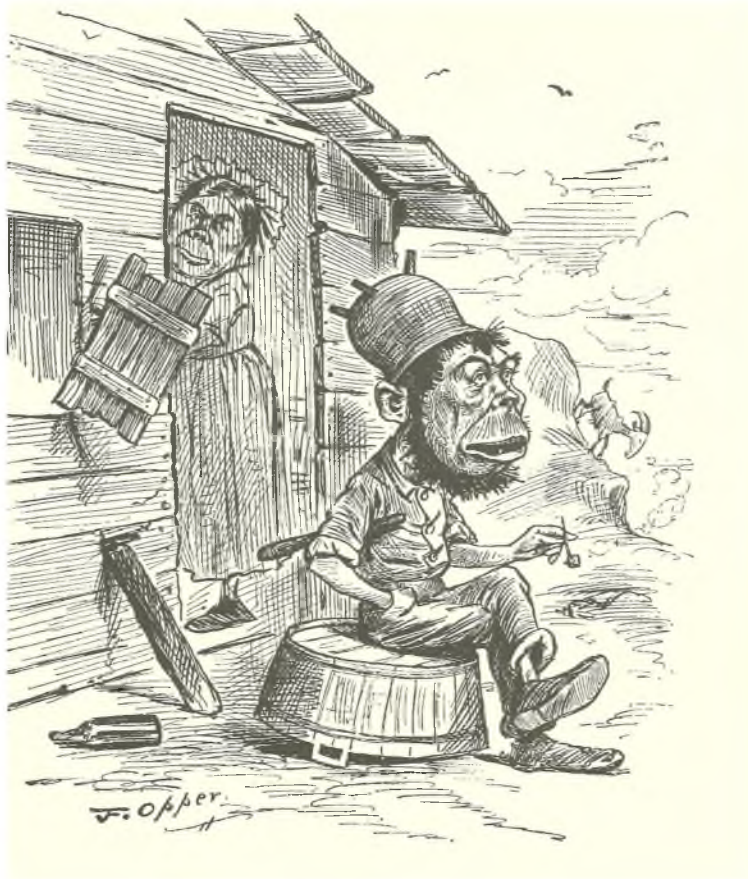


Figure 1 “The King of A-Shantee.”<sup>19</sup>

dealing in treason without any legitimate grievances to speak of, they were categorized as dangerous political criminals; and the criminal classes, especially those involved in crimes of violence against persons, were already being depicted in cartoons and book illustrations as acutely prognathous brutes with enormous jaws and tiny brains.”<sup>20</sup> Thus the racialization of the Irish was used in order to justify colonialism and the suppression of radical republicanism. This coincided with the emergence of evolutionary theory.

Nelson points out that there, “was a dramatically new development in the second half of

<sup>19</sup> J. Opper, “The King of A-Shantee,” cartoon, *Puck*, February 15 1882, 10, no. 258: 378.

<sup>20</sup> L. Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), 102.

the nineteenth century, a time when Darwinian science posited an evolutionary chain of being in which humans were descended directly from African apes. In this context, British commentators created a ‘simianized’, or apelike, Paddy whose likeness to the ‘backward’ races of Africa was inescapable.”<sup>21</sup> Thus the racialization of the Irish created a distinct point of difference between the British and the Irish. Furthermore, the racialization of the Irish had clear implications for the rising Nationalist movement in Ireland. Nadja Durbach has noted that in the nineteenth century, “marrying the older science of physiognomy to the new theory of evolution, political cartoonists drew Irish bodies as apelike prognathous monstrosities. This established the Irish in the popular mind as an inferior people unfit for self-rule. Indeed, from the 1860s, which were marked by the rise of Fenian violence, the popular press depicted the Irish as a savage race that had more in common with African peoples than with their British neighbors.”<sup>22</sup> Republican activity in Ireland thus tended to be depicted in the press and in political cartoons as invariably negative and represented through the discourses of savagery.

Although the Nationalist movement sought to create an Irish nation along shared and distinct cultural lines separate from the British, within Ireland another point of difference was created amongst the Irish along religious lines. The historical development of Ulster and the southern counties contributed directly to the development of the Nationalist and Unionist movements that plagued Ireland throughout the twentieth century. Perhaps the most notorious event in the development of Early Modern Ireland is the campaign of Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century.

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<sup>21</sup> Nelson, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 167.



Historian R.M. Foster noted, “Oliver Cromwell changed the face of Irish war, landscape, and history... commissioned to enforce the control of Parliament and ensure the progress of the new Protestant land settlement and the transplantation of Catholics.”<sup>23</sup> Cromwell was largely responsible for the development of a Protestant majority in Ulster, as Catholics were removed from their land and transplanted to the south and west. Cromwell’s murderous tactics in Ireland against Catholics led to the surrender of many Catholic strongholds and increased bitterness towards Protestant rule over the next couple of centuries.<sup>24</sup> Cromwell’s legacy in Ireland can be found in the spatial developments of Ulster and the South in the years following his rule. Foster added, “Cromwellian Ireland lasted a decade... Though many changes were nominal only, landowning and religion now followed a sharp line of demarcation.”<sup>25</sup> In the supplanting of Catholics from Ulster, a distinct spatial separation was created that would change the face of Irish politics for centuries to come.

Though dissent and rebellions were common after the Cromwell years, the creation of an Irish national identity and the Nationalist movement gained momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The process of anglicanization in Ireland was widely apparent after over two hundred years of British Rule. The Ireland that had existed before British rule was gone, so what would an Irish nation without Britain look like? There is no question that even the most fervent Nationalist had been influenced by the constant, dominant control of Britain. The creation of an Irish

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<sup>23</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600–1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 101n.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 101–116.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 114.

national identity separate from Britain became the most important aspect of Irish Nationalist rhetoric.<sup>26</sup>

In order to separate themselves from British rule, the Nationalist movement had to create a nation where one no longer existed. In this respect, the Nationalist movement in Ireland supports Benedict Anderson's work *Imagined Communities* on nation/state formation. Anderson defined the nation as, "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>27</sup> Under British rule, Ireland was not its own "imagined community," and specifically it lacked its own sovereignty. Anderson added, "Nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state."<sup>28</sup> The words self determination emerge frequently in the Nationalist rhetoric of the nineteenth and twentieth century, specifically when Britain attempted to conscript the Irish who felt that they should be able to determine for themselves if they were to be compelled to fight this war. In addition, the Nationalist movement wanted to create a sense of cohesiveness amongst the Irish people. Anderson noted, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."<sup>29</sup> This led to the creation of an Irish national identity and Irishness that included cultural and racial sameness.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Nationalist movement gained momentum. One of the most influential documents in the creation of an Irish nation

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<sup>26</sup> Leon O'Broin, *Revolutionary Underground: The Story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

was Douglass Hyde's 1892 manifesto *The Necessity for De-Anglicanising Ireland*.

Hyde was an Irish scholar who also served as the first president of Ireland. In his manifesto, Hyde calls for the rejection of English culture and a revival of the culture and customs that made Ireland distinct. Hyde wrote, "It has always been very curious to me how Irish sentiment... continues to apparently hate the English and at the same time continues to imitate them; how it continues to clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality, and at the same time throws away with both hands what would make it so."<sup>30</sup> The Irish, Hyde argued, could only make a distinct Irish nation by celebrating the things that made them Irish and not mimicking the English. This meant a revival of Gaelic language, Irish music, poetry, and sports. Hyde added, "It is just because there appears no earthly change of their [Irish] becoming good members of the Empire that I urge that they should not remain in the anomalous position they are in, but since they absolutely refuse to become the one thing, that they become the other; cultivate what they have rejected, and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines."<sup>31</sup> Hyde's manifesto was not so much a suggestion to Irish Nationalists, but rather an indictment of the Irish deliberately throwing away their culture to imitate the English. "Within the last ninety years," Hyde stated, "We have, with unparalleled frivolity, deliberately thrown away our birthright and Anglicanised ourselves."<sup>32</sup> Hyde's manifesto was so effective in inspiring an Irish nation because it was bipartisan; it was aimed at both Nationalists and Unionists. Hyde concluded, "I appeal to every one whatever his politics—for this is no political matter—to do his best to help the Irish race to develop in future upon Irish

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<sup>30</sup> Douglass Hyde, "The Necessity for De-Anglicanising the Irish," 154.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 159.

lines, even at the risk of encouraging national aspirations, because upon Irish lines alone can the Irish race once more become what it was of yore—one of the most original, artistic, literary, and charming peoples of Europe.”<sup>33</sup> Hyde’s manifesto is reminiscent of Anderson’s assertion of imagined nationhood in that it prescribed the creation of an Irish nation along cultural lines with shared language, arts, and culture even though all Irish were not the same. Despite Hyde’s manifesto being apolitical and nonreligious, it was taken up in the Nationalist movement and its rhetoric became a point of difference from the Unionist cause.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century the Nationalist movement concentrated on attempting to secure Home Rule for Ireland. Home Rule was defined as having a local Irish Parliament that oversaw local affairs and domestic issues, but still had Imperial federal obligations to Britain. Home Rule bills went before Parliament in 1886 and 1893 but were rejected. Finally in 1912 a Home Rule bill was passed through Parliament and set to be enacted, but was put on hold due to the outbreak of World War I. In fact, the Easter Rising in 1916 and Anglo-Irish violence that followed the war ensured that it was never enacted. The question before Parliament was always whether Home Rule could exist with Ulster. Every time Home Rule was considered in Parliament the question of Ulster was fiercely debated. As part of the United Kingdom, the majority Unionists in Ulster enjoyed protection from Britain. However under Home Rule, Ulster would be (in their view) at the mercy of the more populous southern Catholics and Nationalists. During a Home Rule debate in the House of Lords in 1914, the Marquess of Lansdowne spoke of the plight of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 170.

Unionists in Ulster: “Let me use a very homely illustration,” he began. “There is a great difference between telling a man that he is not to have a new coat and tearing off his back the coat which he is already wearing. That is what you are going to do in Ulster, and the reason why the resentment in Ulster is so intense and so irreconcilable is that the people of Ulster feel that you are taking away from them something that they have got and driving them into a position which they regard, and I think not without good reason, as an intolerable and odious position.”<sup>34</sup> Unionists felt that if Home Rule were enacted *they* would be forced into a position of subservience to the Nationalists, which was the same way the Nationalists felt about their relationship to Britain. The alternative that was debated was partition: a separation of Ulster from the rest of Ireland. That too had negative implications. During the same debate, the Earl of Wicklow argued, “If the population of Ulster was exclusively Unionist, and the population of the three southern provinces exclusively Nationalist, it might be possible to arrive at a settlement by what is known as the policy of the exclusion of Ulster. But you cannot separate Ulster from the rest of Ireland without inflicting an abominable injustice, on the one hand, upon the Nationalist population of Ulster, and, on the other hand, upon the Unionist population of the three southern provinces.”<sup>35</sup> The Home Rule problem was extremely complicated and there was not an easy solution that appealed both Nationalists and Unionists. It was, however, a problem created by hundreds of years of British policy and Catholic persecution, which makes it unsurprising that the British were unable to find a peaceful, diplomatic solution to what they called “the Irish Question.” This was the situation in Ireland on the eve of World War I with

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<sup>34</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 15 (1914), cols. 56–144.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Nationalists clamoring for Home Rule and Unionists fighting to stay within the United Kingdom. Over the next four years, the tension between these groups grew, which spilled over into wartime propaganda and conscription protests.

## THE WAR AND NATIONALISM

In August of 1914, weeks after the German invasion of Belgium, Britain was thrust full force into the throngs of war. The British committed hundreds of thousands of troops to the defense of Belgium and the protection of France from the advancing Germans. The troops did not come from Britain alone as the dominions of the Empire also provided troops to supplement the influx into mainland Europe. It was at this point that Irish Member of Parliament John Redmond from Waterford, a Nationalist and fervent supporter of Home Rule, spoke in Parliament about the status of Ireland in the war. Redmond explained, “In no quarter of the world, I feel convinced, has the heroism of the Belgian people been received with more genuine enthusiasm and admiration than within the shores of Ireland, and there is no compliment which it would be possible for the Irish people to pay to Belgium that they would not willingly pay, and there is no sacrifice I believe which Ireland would not be willing to make to come to their assistance. In this regard I am glad and proud to be able to think that at this moment there are many gallant Irishmen willing to take their share of the risks and to shed their blood and to face death in the assistance of the Belgian people in the defense of their liberty and their independence.”<sup>36</sup> Thus Redmond became a symbol to Nationalist Irishmen of the importance of volunteering, as the fate of the war might also determine the fate of Ireland. Redmond encouraged the Irish to fight not on behalf of Britain but

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<sup>36</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 66 (1914), cols.191–4.

rather to defend the rights of another small European country to self-determination. But Redmond also proved that he could be a useful tool for the British to recruit troops along Nationalist lines. Thomas Hennessey has argued that “Redmond’s offer of the Irish Nationalist Volunteers for home defense was, for many Nationalists, the limit of what Nationalist Ireland could offer to Britain, which, because it was in excess of what any Nationalist leader had previously offered in peace and war, had aptly demonstrated Nationalist Ireland’s imperial loyalty. It was duly expected that the British Government, and British and Irish Unionists, would recognize this and implement Home Rule.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the contingency upon which Nationalist Ireland supported the war was that Britain would honor their promise of Home Rule.

After the war broke out, the Irish had a significant amount of men volunteering to fight in Irish Regiments within the British army. In fact, throughout the course of the war the Irish had nearly 150,000 men enlist (though some estimates place that number closer to 200,000, since official numbers did not take into account Irishmen fighting in non-Irish regiments). Irish volunteers enlisted in droves at the beginning of the war with over 50,000 men in the first six months alone (Table 1) and equally respectable numbers over the following year. The most significant drop occurred in the period between February and August of 1916 where recruits numbered less than half of the previous six-month period. This was due in large part to the change in public opinion following the Easter Rising in April 1916 where the tactics used by the British to suppress the rebellion and the subsequent execution of its leaders hardened the Irish Nationalist’s views of British colonial rule. Nevertheless, the strategy and propaganda

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition* (London: Routledge Publishers, 1998), 79.



Table 1 Irish Volunteers in World War I (Adapted from Jeffrey)<sup>38</sup>

Period	Total
August 1914 to February 1915	50,107
February 1915 to August 1915	20,235
August 1915 to February 1916	19,801
February 1916 to August 1916	9,323
August 1916 to February 1917	8,178
February 1917 to August 1917	5,609
August 1917 to February 1918	6,550
February 1918 to August 1918	5,812
August 1918 to November 1918	9,845
Total	140,460

used by the British to recruit Irish troops in Ulster and in the southern counties appealed to the very different political and religious affiliations of the regions.

In the south, British recruiting propaganda appealed to both the Nationalist movement and the predominant Catholic population. To appeal to the more moderate Nationalists, the British used a recruiting poster featuring John Redmond, prominent member of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), urging Irishmen to take their part in ending the war (Figure 2). At this point, moderate Nationalists (IPP) were the more dominant and powerful political group in the south. The more radical Separatists, Sinn Féin, were comprised of a relatively small portion of the population in 1914. Therefore, the recruiters appealed to the Nationalist ideals of the more moderate IPP when attempting to gain recruits. In addition, as Ben Novick has argued, “the pro-war forces

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<sup>38</sup> Keith Jeffrey, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.



Figure 2 John Redmond Recruiting Poster<sup>39</sup>

in Ireland enjoyed the essential support, financially and legally, of the government, both in Britain and in the Irish Parliamentary Party...it meant that nationally famous figures [Redmond]...would lend their weight and influence to the recruiting campaigns.”<sup>40</sup>

With Redmond the British had a useful recruiting tool: he was a widely respected member of the IPP, loyal to the crown, but also a strong proponent of Home Rule. With his influence, the British were able to recruit soldiers along Nationalist lines as most

<sup>39</sup> Redmond, John Edward, and Central Council for the Organization of Recruiting in Ireland. *"Your First Duty Is to Take Your Part in Ending the War" Mr. J.E. Redmond, M.P. At Waterford, 23rd August, 1915: Join an Irish Regiment To-day* [S.l.]: Central Council for the Organization of Recruiting in Ireland, 1915.

<sup>40</sup> Novick, 26.

moderate Nationalists believed that if they followed Redmond's advice they would be able to secure Home Rule for Ireland following the war.

The British also recruited in the southern colonies by appealing to the dominant Catholic religion. Though not all Nationalists were Catholics and neither were all Unionists Protestants, Catholicism had long divided Ulster from the southern counties and was often incorrectly equated with the Nationalist movement. In a recruiting poster aimed at Catholics, a rural farmer looks devoutly, hat in hand, at the ruins of a cathedral destroyed by the war (Figure 3). The caption below reads: "Can You any longer resist the Call?" Knowing that in order to recruit Catholics it was best not to stir up any anti-British sentiment, the poster focuses solely on appealing to Catholics to help other Catholics in Belgium and France. This call is thus not overtly Nationalist. It does, however, contain appeals to Irish Nationalism. First, the man in the poster is a farmer wearing respectable work clothes. His boots go up to his knees and his sleeves are rolled up past his elbows to protect his clothing from dirt. This poster appealed to the Irish farmer's loyalty to the land in addition to his loyalty to the Catholic Church. The poster implicitly responded to the fact that Catholics were the group in Ireland with the least amount of volunteers. As Thomas Hennessy argued, "Given the historic nature of Nationalist Ireland's relationship with the British Empire the level of Catholic enlistment into the British military appeared impressive. However, the debate on the constitutional future of Ireland also meant that the issue of recruitment became the litmus test of the Irish Party's claims that Irish Nationalism and British Imperialism were compatible."<sup>41</sup> Gaining Catholic recruits was thus imperative to prove that Home

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<sup>41</sup>Hennessy, 97.



Figure 3 “Can You any longer resist the Call?”<sup>42</sup>

Rule could work within Ireland and that Redmond’s and the IPP’s assertion of coexistence was indeed possible. The fact that Catholics did enlist proved that they could work alongside Protestants without these tensions getting in the way.<sup>43</sup>

In Ulster, recruiting posters focused on the discourse of Empire, featuring elements of imperial power and the paternalistic nature of British Rule. In a recruiting poster seen in Ulster, a male lion stands in a position of power over younger lions under a caption

<sup>42</sup> Central Council for the Organization of Recruiting in Ireland. *Can You Any Longer Resist the Call?* [s.l.]: Department of Recruiting for Ireland, 1914–1918.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Grayson, *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War* (London: Continuum Books, 2009).

that reads, “The Empire Needs Men.” (Figure 4). Below the image the text reads, “Helped by the young lions, the old lion defies his foes.” This poster appealed to the pro-Empire sentiment in Ulster because it includes Ulster as part of the greater British Empire. Here Ireland is cast as one of the younger lions seeking to help the older, more powerful lion defeat his foes. In addition, the poster connotes the paternalistic rhetoric of Britain as an imperial power. The older lion, a traditional symbol of British imperial strength, can be viewed as a father figure who watches over and protects the younger lions that represent Britain’s colonies throughout the world. This puts the colonies in a position of dependency on Britain, though Britain is the one that needs their help in providing manpower at the front. But the image also suggested that the young lions will eventually grow up and become powerful imperial leaders in the future. The war, therefore, is the training ground for imperial men who will one day grow to take over from the older generation.<sup>44</sup>

Recruiting in Ulster was arguably easier than recruiting in the southern counties. In general, Ulster was more supportive of British rule and policies. Thomas Hennessy has argued that, “Unionist Ireland received Britain’s declaration of war in a manner which demonstrated its psychological integration into a British patriotism ... Unionist support of Britain’s in the war was unqualified, demonstrated through the automatic acceptance of the righteousness of British actions.”<sup>45</sup> Since Ulster was more inclined to follow Britain into war, the recruiting efforts highlighted the inclusion of Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and focused on the part Ireland could and should play to promote the British Empire. Thus, the recruitment materials took a pro-empire and

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<sup>44</sup> Maria Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership* (London: Zed Books, 2005); Uma Narayan, “Colonialism and its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses,” *Hypatia* 10, no. 2 (May 1995): 133–140.

<sup>45</sup> Hennessy, 123–124.



Figure 4. “The Empire Needs Men!”<sup>46</sup>

pro-British stance and propagated a sense of collective purpose.

Recruiting efforts in Ulster and in the southern counties called into question the notion of volunteerism. Since Irish Regiments in World War I were one hundred percent volunteers and no one was forced to fight in the war, the question of why Irishmen decided to enlist arose. Some volunteered to fight for the glory of Britain and defense of the Empire, while others volunteered to fight for the glory of Ireland and the

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<sup>46</sup> Wardle, Arthur. *The Empire Needs Men! The Overseas States : All Answer the Call : Helped By the Young Lions the Old Lion Defies His Foes : Enlist Now*. London: Published by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, 1915.

hope that their sacrifice would one day lead to a country of their own. However, the reasons for volunteering were not always so black and white. In fact, Irishmen had a number of motives for enlisting that often became more apparent as their experiences in the war shaped their politics. Sebastian Barry's novel *A Long, Long Way* follows the life of Willie Dunne, a young Irishman from a middle class Unionist family who enlists in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in order to please his father, a staunch Loyalist.

Throughout the course of the war, Willie is transformed by the mistreatment of Irish troops by the British, his witnessing of the Easter Rising in Dublin, and the execution of a young Irishman who refused to continue fighting after the execution of the Easter Rising leaders. By the end of the war, Willie's perception of the British has changed, and he begins to feel more of an affinity for the Nationalist movement in Ireland.

Barry's novel shows the complexity of national consciousness within Ireland during World War I and the varying degrees of patriotism, loyalty, and duty. The people of Ireland were not simply divided into two categories: Nationalist and Unionist. These political positions were often unstable. In Ulster, the prominent British patriotism amongst Unionists seems to be the primary reason why Irishmen volunteered.

However, in the Nationalist movements in the southern colonies, the reasons seem to be a little more complicated. Whereas in Ulster men might enlist out of a sense of duty to defend their country, the Nationalists felt that they did not have a country to defend. Instead Nationalists defended the *idea* of a country. They felt that if they enlisted they would one day have a country of their own. The possibility of Home Rule was a powerful recruiting tool in itself. However as the war progressed it became more

evident that Home Rule remained only a dream as the tension in Ireland boiled over and the efforts towards a peaceful solution to the Irish question took a turn for the worse.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Nicholas Mansergh, *The Irish Question 1840–1921* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975); Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867–1921* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).



## THE CONSCRIPTION DEBATES

By the time the House of Commons had voted to extend conscription to Ireland in April of 1918, it was hardly the first time that conscription had been debated in Parliament. In fact, conscripting the Irish had been discussed several times since the beginning of the war in 1914. During a debate in December of 1915, MP John Redmond (provolunteerism, but anticonscription) voiced his concerns over extending conscription to Ireland: “Therefore I say that if it is proposed under present conditions and circumstances, I, for one, shall oppose it by every means in my power. I am convinced it would break up the unity of this country. It would be fiercely resented and fiercely opposed, not only on the floor of this House, but outside, and in the end, I am profoundly convinced, its result in point of men would be ridiculously small.”<sup>48</sup> Redmond worried, as other members of the Irish Party worried, that conscription would lead to further turmoil in Ireland and thereby destroy the Party’s hopes of attaining Home Rule following the war. In addition, Redmond felt that since the British would not gain many troops from conscription, the negative aspects far outweighed the positive. Finally, Redmond argued that Ireland had already recruited an impressive amount of troops for the war who had performed admirably on the front lines. He reasoned, “Not only by the numbers of men she has contributed has Ireland shown her view, but I think I may say with pardonable pride that her view has been emphasised

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<sup>48</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 77 (1915), cols. 213–437.

upon the battlefield by her sons at every seat of war, both in the East and in the West. I say that she is ready for any sacrifice which she considers necessary for the successful ending of this War, or, to put it lower, that she thinks is really calculated to lead to a speedy and successful ending of the War.”<sup>49</sup> For Redmond, the sacrifice of the volunteers at the front was proof that Ireland was doing her part in helping to end the war. Conscription, he felt, would not produce the results the British had anticipated.

Redmond’s political rival and head of the Unionist Party in Ulster was Edward Carson, who was in favor of conscripting the Irish. During a debate on conscription in January of 1916 Carson argued, “I have been unable to find, as I have said, any argument which shows the difference between Ireland and the other parts of the United Kingdom, and in my heart I believe that when the hour of victory comes, as it certainly will, we who are Irishmen will feel ashamed to remember that we expected others to make sacrifices from which we provided our own exclusion.”<sup>50</sup> Carson and the Parliamentary Unionists believed that conscripting the Irish was fair because Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom and therefore just as responsible as Scotland and Wales for providing conscripts. But the Parliamentary Unionists’ firm support of conscription prior to 1918 became an embarrassment when the British actually did vote through conscription for Ireland in 1918 and the Unionists turned around and vehemently opposed it. This led to the Nationalists calling the Unionists out on their “conditional loyalty” to Britain.

The debates around conscription between Redmond and Carson lend some insight into the political agendas of their respective parties. Redmond was against

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th Ser., vol. 77 (1916), cols. 1457–574.

conscription because he saw Ireland as a separate political entity, on the eve of Home Rule, and in a precarious situation that should not be aggravated. He argued therefore that Ireland should be *excluded* from conscription. Carson, on the other hand, viewed Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and reasoned that she should therefore be *included* in policies that were for the greater good of the Empire. The contrast between exclusion and inclusion in British policies is at the forefront of the Nationalist and Unionists debate and carried over into the Conscription Crisis of 1918. Nationalists constantly reiterated through their protests that Ireland should have self-determination and decide for themselves what course of action to take in the war. The Unionists (prior to 1918) argued that Ireland had a responsibility to shoulder some of the sacrifice in the war and should not be excluded from the same sacrifices made by others within the Empire.

In addition to Carson and Redmond, prior to the extension of conscription to Ireland, other members of Parliament voiced their opinions about Irish conscription. In May of 1916, a month after the events of the Easter Rising, a Military Service Bill was introduced in the House of Commons extending conscription to every male in Great Britain between the ages of eighteen and forty-one, both married and single. Once again, an amendment was proposed to extend conscription to Ireland. Sir John Lonsdale, a British Conservative and Home Rule opponent who served in the House of Commons under the Irish Unionist Party, argued that the reason that Britain had not yet conscripted the Irish was out of fear of sedition and rebellion, yet the Irish had rebelled anyway thereby negating that reason.<sup>51</sup> “This rebellion has been suppressed,” he

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<sup>51</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th Ser., vol. 82 (1916), cols. 472–620.

claimed, “and surely there is no longer any reason to anticipate that this measure of compulsion, with all the safeguards which are embodied in the Bill, would meet with serious objection in any quarter of Ireland.” “I am sure that every true Irishman must feel that the occurrences of Easter week have brought shame upon our country,” he further contended, “and I venture to urge once more upon my Nationalist fellow-countrymen that by agreeing to this Amendment they will show the whole world that Ireland is indeed at one with Great Britain and our Allies in prosecuting this War to a successful conclusion.”<sup>52</sup>

Sir Lonsdale’s argument was seemingly far removed from reality. He inaccurately asserted that after the quelling of the Easter Rising, conscription would not face any serious resistance in Ireland. In reality, public opinion had become more anti-British after the Rising, not necessarily because of the Rising itself, but because of the tactics used by the British to suppress it, specifically the execution of sixteen leaders of the rebellion. William O’Brien, a Nationalist MP from Cork, described the post-Rising situation in his city in these terms: “Cork has supplied more recruits than other parts of Ireland, and men from Cork have won four of the seven Victoria Crosses which have been awarded to Irishmen. Cork has, thank God, been free from the scenes which have drenched the streets of Dublin with blood, but our reward has been that...hundreds of men have been flung into gaol without charge stated, they have been treated with the utmost brutality.”<sup>53</sup> O’Brien argued that the punishment for the Rising went far beyond the people who were directly involved. Furthermore, Sir Lonsdale’s assumption that any “true Irishman” felt the rebellion brought shame on Great Britain implied that to be

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

a true Irishman was to be supportive of Great Britain. Did that mean that only Unionists or more moderate Nationalists were the only true Irishmen? The proponents of the Easter Rising and radical Nationalists argued conversely that they were indeed the true Irishmen.

In response to Sir Lonsdale's proposal, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith (1908–1916) advocated to exclude Ireland from the conscription bill. He argued, “without in any way prejudging the question raised by the hon. Gentleman as to whether or not compulsion, having been applied to the United Kingdom, ought or ought not to be applied to Ireland, I would beg of him in the interests of the progress, of the Bill and the unity we hope to be able to obtain ill Irish opinion, and of the pressing dangers and difficulties in that country which further controversy at this moment or in this House might inflame, I appeal to him and his friends, without in any way abandoning the position they have taken up, to withdraw this Amendment and allow us to proceed with the Bill in the form in which it is introduced.”<sup>54</sup> Asquith, while not necessarily disagreeing with Sir Lonsdale, had more insight than his opponent, sensing that conscription in Ireland would, at this time, only make matters worse. Asquith was intent on not settling the question of Irish conscription with this bill, and though he would only be Prime Minister for a few more months, he maintained that position for the remainder of the war. Winston Churchill, serving as Lieutenant Colonel at the time, maintained that Ireland should be conscripted but felt, like Asquith, that May of 1916 was not the right time to move forward with this initiative. Churchill argued that, “In spite of the serious losses to Ireland and the serious losses to Great Britain by the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

omission of Ireland by this Bill, I agree with the Government that it is not worth while at the present time to court a serious Irish row, with great embarrassment in the House of Commons, if such a thing were possible, and with difficulties in the Government of Ireland. But I agree fully that this is not a question of mere logic or of fairness. It cannot be settled on those lines.”<sup>55</sup> Churchill, like Asquith, cited the unrest in Ireland following the Rising as a reason not to pursue Irish conscription at this time; however, for many Irish Nationalist members of Parliament, the reasons not to conscript the Irish ran deeper than the failed rebellion.

William O’Brien cited the historical mismanagement of Ireland by Britain and the decades of hardships as reasons for not applying conscription to Ireland. “Here is a small agricultural country whose population has been diminished by millions within living memory by famine, by migration and by misgovernment,” he argued, “and you are actually expecting us to contribute the same proportion of recruits as a country like England, which is growing enormously every year in population and in wealth.”<sup>56</sup> O’Brien felt that it was wrong of Britain to expect a proportionate amount of soldiers in line with the rest of Great Britain given the disproportionate amount of wealth and people in England. Furthermore, O’Brien added that the Irish sacrifice for the war effort exists only to serve Britain, not Ireland. He stated, “I ask this House to-day to continue, as the Government have wisely done from the beginning, to recognise that they are dealing with a sensitive and sorely tried nation who have sealed their fidelity with their blood, blood that can be badly afforded, and not to victimise us or Ireland because we refuse to shoulder responsibilities in a war which will leave England in a

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

position of unexampled power and splendour for a century to come, whereas we shall have nothing, or next to nothing, in Ireland, except long years of repression and ruinous over-taxation.”<sup>57</sup> Here O’Brien argued, as other Nationalist politicians had, that Ireland had already sacrificed many men for the war effort though the potential victory for Britain would do little to improve the Nationalist position in Ireland.

The Military Service Bill of 1916 passed through the House of Commons in May without an amendment to conscript the Irish. Once in the House of Lords, the omission of Irish conscription was debated once again. Lord Strachie of Britain, Liberal politician and a proponent of Home Rule, lamented the exclusion of Ireland on the grounds that the sacrifice was not equal throughout Great Britain. He argued, “It seems to me a very great injustice that British mothers and British wives should have to give their nearest and dearest, while Irish mothers and Irish wives are able to keep their sons and husbands safely at home. Married men in Great Britain are asked not only to risk life and limb—which they are very ready to do—but also to suffer the loss of their businesses and the breaking up of their homes; whereas if they happened to live in Ireland they would be allowed to remain in perfect safety.”<sup>58</sup> Lord Strachie’s argument epitomized the widespread British position on the extension of conscription to Ireland: the inequality of sacrifice. However, many Nationalist opponents to conscription argued that the Irish were not seen or treated as equal to Britons; therefore, should not be expected to sacrifice equally in relation to conscription.

In April of 1918, conscription was finally extended to Ireland; however, the bill was no less fiercely debated. The language used by the British during the debates

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 22 (1916), cols. 6–68.

indicated their perception of Ireland as having an obligation to the United Kingdom. Prime Minister David Lloyd George (1916–1922) argued that, “the character of the quarrel in which we are engaged is just as much Irish as it is English. May I say it is more so—It is more Irish and Scottish and Welsh than it is even English.”<sup>59</sup> He later stated that this was because the Great War was a war for small nations. The Irish representatives in Parliament argued that Ireland is not yet her own nation, since she cannot decide her own fate.<sup>60</sup> However, Lloyd George reached the core of his reasoning when he stated: “The Irish representatives, and Ireland, through its representatives without a dissentient voice, committed the Empire to this war. They are fully as responsible for it as any part of the United Kingdom.”<sup>61</sup> Ireland, he reasoned echoing Carson, as part of the United Kingdom had voted for waging the war, and were therefore responsible for providing men to fight it. Britain was thus justified in conscripting men within and throughout its kingdom. Furthermore, Lloyd George maintained that it was both “illogical” and “unjust” that other men within the realm were conscripted while the Irish were exempt.<sup>62</sup> But the Irish representatives throughout this debate warned the Prime Minister that he would have another war front on his hands in Ireland should conscription be enacted as many of the Irish would rather rebel than allow themselves or their loved ones to be conscripted.<sup>63</sup> However, the words of Lloyd George reflected the opinion of many prominent British men as to what the role of Ireland was within the Empire: a source of untapped manpower. Though

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<sup>59</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 104 (1918), cols. 1357–62.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



Lloyd George argued that Ireland had representation in Parliament, there were not enough Irish representatives to carry a decision within the House of Commons, and consequently they were at the mercy of the British when voting on issues that concerned Ireland.

In an attempt to assuage the blow of conscription on the Irish, Lloyd George proposed a Home Rule Bill in Parliament on the same day as the Military Service Bill, while absorbing further jeers from the Irish representatives. He stated, “Whilst Great Britain is fighting for national rights in Europe with all her reserves of strength, she is prepared to concede the same rights in her own sphere of government.”<sup>64</sup> It is unclear if Lloyd George felt this softened the blow of conscription or made conscription more enticing for Ireland, but for many of the Irish representatives it was too late for this concession. Home Rule had already been voted in prior to the start of the war in 1914, but never enacted. To package it now with compulsory service was considered by the Irish representatives to be another act of oppression and suggested that the government had indeed totally abandoned the 1914 promise.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Bonar Law registered his opinion during the debate, making it clear that the government would not waver on any of the major points of the bill, including Ireland.<sup>65</sup> *The Times* noted that Law “declared that the Nationalists did not understand what the feeling in Great Britain was on this question and told them that it was a great mistake to suppose that the Government had put compulsion for Ireland in the Bill as a pious opinion.”<sup>66</sup> Though it appears that the British government

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<sup>64</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 104 (1918), cols. 1362–4.

<sup>65</sup> “Man-Power Bill,” *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

<sup>66</sup> “Man-Power Bill,” *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

thought Irish conscription through before adding it to the Military Service Bill, Bonar Law may not have fully understood how the Nationalists or other Irishmen felt about Britain conscripting the Irish. His words illustrate the divide between Irish and British opinions of their relationship both in the present day and in the planned for future. In supposing that the Nationalists did not understand, Law demonstrated that *he* did not understand the condition of their relationship with Ireland. Law added, “[the government] believed that it would make a difference of military strength, which made it their duty to face the consequences, whatever they might be.”<sup>67</sup> Once again Law vocalized the popular British opinion that the Irish have a “duty” to serve Britain. However, the Nationalist Irish felt their duty was to Ireland, not Britain. Where one’s loyalty should lie and duty to one’s country were at the heart of the Irish conscription debates. For the Irish this was a complicated issue as they were members of two countries—Ireland and the United Kingdom—at the same time. The tension here was thus between competing loyalties. For the English, England, Britain, and the United Kingdom were generally synonymous whereas the same was not true for Ireland.<sup>68</sup>

On April 11, *The London Times* published an article that included a statement from Labour Party member George Barnes in response to the growing inevitability of conscription protests in Ireland. In his statement, Barnes urged Ireland to be patient and hopeful of a peaceful solution.<sup>69</sup> When asked if he thought Ireland would fight against conscription, Barnes replied, “I think there is no need for them to fight against conscription. Home Rule is right ahead. I know, of course, that in times gone by the

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<sup>67</sup> “Man-Power Bill,” *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

<sup>68</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> “Impassioned Irish Protests,” *The London Times*, April 22, 1918.

Irish people have been led to within sight of the promised land, only to find it disappear like a mirage before their eyes.”<sup>70</sup> While Barnes advocated Irish patience in attaining Home Rule, he also recognized that the previous times that the British had made such promises, they defaulted on them. This seems to be indicative of the divide between the Irish and British views on conscription. Barnes, a British politician, urged the Irish to show restraint because he viewed conscription as a stepping stone to Home Rule, whereas the Irish saw it as yet another mandate handed down by the British that impeded their move toward independence.

Though Barnes believed that the Irish should weather conscription, he was also aware that the situation in Ireland was precariously close to revolution. “Ireland is full of combustible material,” he stated, “there is an insurgent people on the one hand and the soldiery on the other. A spark on either side may kindle a feeling likely to create a disaster that would spoil everything.”<sup>71</sup> Barnes saw that the tension in Ireland was already coming to a head, but he and other British politicians did not seem to view Irish conscription as anything that would be a tipping point towards an insurrection. Barnes saw the resolution of tensions in a peaceful, diplomatic solution that was beneficial to both countries. He echoed the sentiment of other Britons in viewing the future of Ireland and Britain as being one in which the two were linked within the United Kingdom, but with Ireland having Home Rule and thus control over local affairs. When asked about separation, Barnes explained, “Separation is not possible, and even if it were, it would be a bad thing for Ireland and bad for England. I believe that the interests of Ireland, as well as the interests of this country, lie in a closer union of

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<sup>70</sup> “Impassioned Irish Protests,” *The London Times*, April 22, 1918.

<sup>71</sup> “Impassioned Irish Protests,” *The London Times*, April 22, 1918.

sympathy and a desire to compose those differences which have embittered the political life of the United Kingdom for generations.”<sup>72</sup> Like many others, Barnes could not dream of the day where Ireland existed independent of Britain. This British notion of a United Kingdom with Ireland as one country within it was one of the reasons why Britain felt they could conscript the Irish, just as they had done with Canada and Australia. They felt, as part of Britain, the Irish were just as subject to conscription as any group within the Empire. However, for the Irish representatives in Parliament this was a violation of their own perceived right to determine the fate of Irishmen.

During the House of Commons debates in April of 1918, Nationalist members of the IPP spoke out against Irish Conscription, notably Joseph Devlin of Belfast and John Dillon of Dublin. Devlin argued that the inclusion of Ireland in the Military Service Bill violated the Irish representatives’ right to self-determination. He stated, “Has the Prime Minister ever taken into consultation a single representative from Ireland upon this question, as to whether an unemancipated race should pay its blood tax to another. If we had our self-government...we should be consulted through the agency of our representatives in that self-elected Parliament. You put upon us a dual insult. You deny to us the right of self-government and then you will not allow us to determine whether the sons of our nation are to be conscripted into your army to fight your battles.”<sup>73</sup> The argument that Devlin put forth echoed throughout the Conscription Crisis protests: the denial of an Irish government that could determine for themselves whether or not to conscript their men. Devlin also played on the concept of Ireland as a separate race of people, an argument that the British had used against them earlier.

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<sup>72</sup> “Impassioned Irish Protests,” *The London Times*, April 22, 1918.

<sup>73</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 104 (1918), cols. 1364–449.

Similarly, John Dillon disputed Irish conscription on the grounds that it violated the very notion of the war as one “for small nationalities” because Ireland was denied her own bid for self-government. Dillon noted, “The Ireland you have to deal with is an ancient nation, and a very proud nation, and it has as intense a sense of national self-consciousness as exists in the whole wide world. They see to-day Poland, Finland, and the Ukraine recognised by the great Powers of Europe as independent nations with the acclamation of His Majesty's Government, and Ireland, which is more ancient than any of them and has far more national self-consciousness, is not only to be denied her liberty, but is to be dragooned, with every circumstance of insolence and insult, and ordered to go out and fight for a people whose Government has broken faith with her over and over again.”<sup>74</sup> Dillon, perhaps more than any other Irish MP, highlighted the hypocrisy of the British fighting a war in defense of other country's nationalism and self-determination while at the same time suppressing those values in her own sphere of government.

Both Devlin and Dillon argued that when the British originally voted for conscription in 1916, and the subsequent extensions that followed, as Irish representatives they had not cast a vote. They felt that they did not have a right to vote for a policy that would affect men who were not within their jurisdiction. The Irish, they reasoned, who were not to be conscripted by this legislation should not therefore decide whether or not the British should be conscripted. They were therefore outraged

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<sup>74</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 104 (1918), cols. 1475–606.

when Irish conscription was added to the Military Service Bill *without* consulting the Irish MPs.<sup>75</sup>

Outside of Parliament, other prominent British men came out in support of Irish conscription. An article in Dublin's *Freeman's Journal* reported the opinion of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, of whom it was claimed exhibited a typical attitude of the British. Doyle argued, "That while Britain is fighting for freedom, Ireland is 'wrangling over her parish pump'."<sup>76</sup> The *Journal* explained that this was the common view of Englishmen who saw the Irish protests and their persistent clamor for Home Rule as inappropriate during such a violent war. However, the *Journal* argued that if Ireland is "wrangling over her parish pump" then "so also are Belgium, Serbia, Poland and Armenia, for in all five countries the issue is precisely the same—a determination to decide their own destinies without interference or intervention by outsiders."<sup>77</sup> The *Journal* chastised Doyle for being ignorant of Irish conditions and suggests that instead he reproach England for denying Ireland the right to determine for herself the best course for Ireland.

Although Conan Doyle's views were typical of English public opinion, not everyone in Britain supported Irish conscription, and many Britons came forward in the following weeks to speak out against it. The London branch of the Labour Party issued a statement that denounced Irish conscription calling it, "an outrage against the principles of liberty of small nations and self-determination of peoples, and calculated

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> "Conscription Menace," *Freeman's Journal*, April 4, 1918.

<sup>77</sup> "Conscription Menace," *Freeman's Journal*, April 4, 1918.

to serious loss of life in Ireland.”<sup>78</sup> *The London Times* reported that all British members of Parliament did not support conscripting the Irish. However, they cautioned their readership that out of the one hundred members who rejected the Bill, “sixty eight of the members...were Irish Nationalists of one type or another, and the remainder were chiefly of the ‘pacifists’ groups.”<sup>79</sup> *The Times’* choice of language lumped Irish Nationalists in with the pacifists, a word, which at the time connoted someone cowardly or weak as conscientious objection, though legal, was highly stigmatized.<sup>80</sup> Their coverage thus implicitly undermined both the moral authority of those who objected to Irish conscription and Ireland’s contribution to the war that included nearly 200,000 volunteers by 1918. In addition, the statement negated the real reasons for Irish Nationalist opposition, of which an objection to the war was only a small part. But opposition to Irish conscription came not merely from groups the *Times* felt comfortable dismissing. Former Prime Minister Asquith felt that the provision of the Military Service Bill that included Irish Conscription should be removed. *The Times* reported that Asquith had “argued that compulsion could not be introduced in Ireland today with any approach to general consent, and went so far as to say that it would be an act of terrible shortsightedness to precede the grant of self-government by imposing upon Ireland a measure which was obnoxious to a very large number of the people.”<sup>81</sup> As

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<sup>78</sup> “An English Protest,” *Freeman’s Journal*, May 31, 1918.

<sup>79</sup> “Man-Power Bill,” *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

<sup>80</sup> Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914–1918* (New York, Houghton Mifflin Publishers, 2011), 188–189.

<sup>81</sup> “Man-Power Bill,” *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

Asquith pointed out, with self-government in the fray, conscripting and arming the Irish would be imprudent.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Cornelius O'Leary & Patrick Maume, *Controversial Issues in Anglo-Irish Relations, 1910–1921* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004).



## AN IRISH UNIFICATION AND THE PROTEST FRONT IN IRELAND

Prior to the passage of the Military Service Bill in Parliament there was a growing fear in Ireland as to how conscription would affect the already fragile political stability. There were Unionists who supported continued membership in the United Kingdom. There were also Nationalists who wished to have Home Rule, defined by local self-government *within* the United Kingdom, represented by the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP). Finally there were Republicans who wanted a free Irish republic separate from Britain, represented by the Sinn Fein Party. These groups had a tenuous peace in Ireland and many feared that any more pressure from Parliament would cause tensions to boil over. Before 1918, most of the Irish were under the impression that the British would not attempt to conscript them because “it was believed that the Government would be afraid to defy the Nationalist Party and to risk the prospect of serious resistance from the Sinn Feiners.”<sup>83</sup> By April of 1918, however, the “pressures of public opinion in Great Britain” had “become very strong,” leading to the prospect of Britain enacting conscription in Ireland.<sup>84</sup>

The Military Service Bill of 1918 was intended to extend conscription within the United Kingdom to men (both single and married) from eighteen years old to fifty-five.

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<sup>83</sup> “Irish Manpower,” *The London Times*, April 9, 1918.

<sup>84</sup> “Irish Manpower,” *The London Times*, April 9, 1918.

It was argued that the British public would not accept another widening of the pool of conscripts with concessions to Ireland. Alan J. Ward noted, “with the German offensive a week old and full of menace, the cabinet made the assumption that parliamentary and public opinion would oppose an extension of conscription which exempted Ireland again. They pushed ahead with their plans which now included both conscription and, albeit very ill-defined, Home Rule for Ireland.”<sup>85</sup> With Parliament and the British public facing a possible defeat in the war with German advances in the spring of 1918, the argument that Britain had done their share of sacrificing while Ireland had not became paramount. In addition, John Stubbs argued, “the government decided, past promises to the contrary, to introduce Irish conscription. Politically it was impossible to extend conscription further in Great Britain without attempting to deal with Ireland as well.”<sup>86</sup> Therefore, in order to assuage public opinion, the British voted to sacrifice Ireland for the cause of the war.

In Ireland, the Irish Parliamentary Party stood to lose the most politically from conscription. The *Nationalist Press* claimed, “that to try to enforce conscription would be an act of insanity, that it would kill every chance of a political settlement, and that it would create a new war front in Ireland.”<sup>87</sup> The Nationalists were worried that everything they had worked for in Parliament would be undone. However, they also feared the enactment, but not *enforcement*, of conscription driving up support for their political opponents, Sinn Fein. The *London Times* reported, “On the one hand the enactment of compulsion for Ireland in the teeth of their opposition in the House of

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<sup>85</sup> Ward, 111.

<sup>86</sup> John O. Stubbs, “The Unionists and Ireland, 1914–1918”, *The Historical* 33, no. 04 (December 1990): 890.

<sup>87</sup> “Irish Manpower,” *The London Times*, April 9, 1918.

Commons would strengthen the case that Nationalist representation at Westminster is a fraud. On the other hand, the Government's refusal to enforce the enacted principle through fear of physical resistance would allow Sinn Fein to boast that it and it alone had saved Ireland from conscription."<sup>88</sup> For the Irish Parliamentary Party, Irish conscription represented both an external and internal risk. However, as the reality of conscription unfolded, it became clear to the leaders of Ireland that a unified front would be necessary in order to defeat it. This meant setting aside political differences for the greater good of Ireland.

One of the most momentous occurrences during the Conscription Crisis was the unification of Nationalist sects in the southern counties against the threat of conscription. In a meeting at the Mansion House in Dublin, the residence of the Lord Mayor, on April 18, 1918, leaders from the three most prominent Nationalist parties (the Irish Party, Sinn Fein, and the All-For-Ireland Party) and leaders from trade unions gathered to discuss how to protest the infliction of conscription. Trade unions formed a large part of the Labour Party and would be instrumental in arranging strikes to protest conscription. At the end of the conference, the delegates issued a resolution that demonstrated their solidarity in protesting conscription. The resolution stated, "Taking our stand on Ireland's separate and distinct nationhood and affirming the principle of liberty that the Governments of nations derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, we deny the right of the British Government, or any external authority, to impose compulsory service in Ireland against the clearly expressed will of the Irish people. The passing of the Conscription Bill by the British House of Commons must be

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<sup>88</sup> "Irish Manpower," *The London Times*, April 9, 1918.

regarded as a declaration of war on the Irish nation. The alternative to accepting it, as such, is to surrender our liberties and to acknowledge ourselves slaves.”<sup>89</sup> The language used in the resolution urged the public to not only protest conscription, but to protest it along Nationalist lines. The resolution mentioned “Ireland’s separate and distinct nationhood” and “consent of the governed,” indicating that the protest was more about self-determination and Irish sovereignty than about Irish conscripts.<sup>90</sup> The resolution also referred to Britain as an “external authority,” claiming that to accept conscription would be “to acknowledge ourselves slaves.” This showed that the Nationalists viewed Ireland as ruled rather than governed by Britain and reiterated their position that they be excluded from British policies. The Nationalist rhetoric from the Mansion House resolution filtered down and infiltrated all aspects of anticonscription discourse.

The Conscription Crisis led to mass political mobilization and polarization in Ireland. While the Irish Party used it as an opportunity to further advocate Home Rule, a far more radical Nationalist party Sinn Fein used it as an opportunity to advocate complete separation from Britain. Sinn Fein, once a small portion of the Nationalist movement in Ireland, became increasingly popular throughout the war and even more so following the Conscription Crisis, leading to overwhelming victories throughout Ireland in the General Election of 1918. Meanwhile, the Unionists in Ulster used the Crisis as an opportunity to reiterate their anti-Separatist stance while at the same time expressing their displeasure with Britain whom they felt sacrificed them for the war effort by marrying Home Rule and conscription. Protests against Irish conscription

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<sup>89</sup> “Violation of the Rights of Small Nationalities,” *Freeman’s Journal*, April 19, 1918.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Kasane, “The Doctrine of Self Determination and the Irish Move to Independence, 1916–1922,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 8, no. 3 (October 2003): 327–346.

were therefore manifestations of these different political movements and the Crisis was quickly absorbed into their often competing agendas.

In the anticonscription propaganda a number of political cartoons illustrated the Nationalist feeling towards conscription. The image in Figure 5 depicts John Bull (the national personification of Britain) tying himself to Erin (the female personification of Ireland) as a German wave of water approaches. John Bull's features are ugly, distorted, and menacing while Erin is graceful and delicate. The image implies that Britain is losing the war in Europe (as many thought at the time) and by conscripting



Figure 5. "Conscription"<sup>91</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Novick, 209.

the Irish they were going to take Ireland down with them. The image is a manifestation of Nationalist rhetoric as it implies that in the current situation Ireland is literally “tied” to Britain. The only way to save themselves would thus be to sever these ties once and for all.

Another anticonscription political cartoon had far more serious implications for politics in Ireland. The image in Figure 6 represents the far more radical side of the Nationalist movement. The image does not implicate Britain so much as it castigates John Redmond and the Irish Party for selling out Ireland to the British. The image is of John Redmond as a butcher to Her Majesty’s Government, carving up Ireland and selling “prime young Irishmen” to Britain. Though Redmond had died in March, the image accuses him and the Irish Party of offering up Irish soldiers for slaughter in order to secure Home Rule for Ireland. The words “We Kill All Our Own” implied that Redmond’s support of Irish volunteerism was responsible for the number of Irish dead and the only way to rectify the situation was to cease selling soldiers to Britain. This political cartoon was meant to have the effect of driving up further support for Sinn Fein and the separation of Ireland from Britain.

The language used throughout the anticonscription protests in the South indicates the increased popularity of the Nationalist movement. The protests used such words and phrases as self-determination, sovereignty, alien government, and act of oppression. The change in language reflects the change in Nationalist opinion in Britain. The majority of Nationalists no longer were content to have Home Rule, which would mean they would still owe allegiance to the King. Instead, the majority of Nationalists were now advocating for complete separation from Britain and the



Figure 6. “Redmond & Co.”<sup>92</sup>

creation of an Irish Republic. In 1918 alone, membership in Sinn Fein nearly doubled (see Table 2) and in the General Election of 1918 Sinn Fein won nearly every parliamentary seat in the southern counties. The protests in the southern counties thus reflect this shift in Nationalist allegiance.

Anticonscriptionists began to hold public meetings to protest what they now termed a “Declaration of War.” An advertisement in the *Nenagh Guardian* called for a public demonstration at the courthouse square and stated that it is to, “protest against the compulsory conscription of Ireland’s manhood by an Alien Government, and to

<sup>92</sup> Novick, 219.

Table 2 Sinn Fein Membership 1917–1918 (Adapted from Hennessey)<sup>93</sup>

	December 1917		December 1918	
Province	Clubs	Members	Clubs	Members
Ulster	230	12,534	308	24,103
Leinster	243	15,125	320	23,234
Connaught	239	14,917	310	26,317
Munster	327	23,694	416	38,426
Total	1,039	66,270	1,354	112,080

pledge ourselves to resist it by the most effective means at our disposal.”<sup>94</sup> The phrase “Alien Government” was especially effective because it denoted a government that is foreign, unwanted, and out of touch with the needs of Irish people. “Alien” also signified that the government in charge was Britain’s government, not Ireland’s government, suggesting that Ireland was not in charge of her own affairs. The advertisement also declared, “Assemble in your thousands and join in the fight against this new act of oppression by the enemies of our country.”<sup>95</sup> Whereas the British used such words as “duty” and “obligation” when discussing conscripting the Irish through the Military Service Bill, this advertisement saw the bill not as an act of duty, but an “act of oppression” by “enemies.” The language used in this advertisement was obviously targeting Republicans and Sinn Feiners who already had preconceived notions about British rule. It played on their already negative views towards the British and equated conscription with an act of war against the Irish. However, looking back to the declaration adopted by the leaders of Ireland at the Mansion House, they too called

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<sup>93</sup> Hennessey, 223.

<sup>94</sup> “Declaration of War,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 20, 1918.

<sup>95</sup> “Declaration of War,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 20, 1918.



the bill a declaration of war, which demonstrated how well the language of protest permeated the country. While this advertisement attracted a certain kind of Irishmen, there were others that were less radical, yet equally effective.

Another ad in the *Nenagh Guardian* posted by the Urban District Council also called for a public meeting to discuss protest options.<sup>96</sup> This advertisement, however, used more moderate language in order to attract attendees. It called for those to gather, “to consider what methods may be adopted to ensure our cooperation with all of our fellow countrymen in the immediate future.”<sup>97</sup> In addition, the ad revealed that, “speakers of every shade of political opinion have promised to attend.”<sup>98</sup> This ad differed significantly from the previous ad because the wording was more inclusive of all Irishmen. While the previous ad appeared to polarize the people of Ireland and called for a more radical approach to protest, this ad sought to unify the people of Ireland no matter what their political allegiance. By calling for “cooperation” with others and including speakers from different political parties, the Urban District Council of Nenagh hoped to present a unified front in the protest against conscription. In fact, many of the protests worked against any divide between radicals on one side and more moderate Nationalists on the other. Furthermore, the *Irish Independent* reported that, “the movement for an All-Ireland covenant in opposition grows...Rev. Dr. Foley advises Irishmen to put aside all differences and unite and organize against the

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<sup>96</sup> “Conscription of Ireland,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 6, 1918.

<sup>97</sup> “Conscription of Ireland,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 6, 1918.

<sup>98</sup> “Conscription of Ireland,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 6, 1918.

threatened danger.”<sup>99</sup> Many recognized that a divided stand would make the country vulnerable to conscription, but a cohesive protest would be much more effective.

One of the most prominent groups to protest conscription in Ireland was the Catholic priests and bishops who protested the act on moral grounds. Among the most outspoken members of clergy was Cardinal Michael Logue. Prior to the passage of the Military Service Bill, Cardinal Logue anticipated Irish conscription and spoke out against it. In a statement issued on April 10, Logue stated that, “since the outbreak of hostilities four years ago the War Office has shown such utter lack of real touch with Irish conditions that it is quite possible something may now be proposed which, if attempted, would only crown the disasters which want of knowledge and want of sympathy have already entailed.”<sup>100</sup> Logue not only foreshadowed the events of the next two months, but he also stressed how dated the British government was when it came to the Irish, insisting that a policy of conscription would be enacted because of ignorance of real Irish conditions. “Had the government in any reasonable time given Ireland the benefit of the principles, which are declared to be at stake in the war, by the concession of a full measure of self-government, there would have been no occasion for contemplating forced levies from her now,” Logue argued.<sup>101</sup> Here Logue reached the crux of a divisive issue. Had Britain granted Home Rule to Ireland back in 1914, prior to the start of the war, Britain would not be in this predicament. Had Ireland had her own government and self-determination, there would most likely be more Irish volunteers and perhaps even conscription enacted by Ireland on her own people.

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<sup>99</sup> “The Storm of Protest,” *Irish Independent*, April 12, 1918.

<sup>100</sup> “Disastrous Policy,” *Irish Independent*, April 10, 1918.

<sup>101</sup> “Disastrous Policy,” *Irish Independent*, April 10, 1918.

However, as Britain had chosen not to grant Home Rule in 1914, and in 1918 only wished to do so with conscription, the British, Logue chided, faced a political disaster entirely of their own making.

North of Dublin, in Cavan, a gathering of priests and bishops took part in “what was probably the largest demonstration held in Cavan.”<sup>102</sup> The message that emanated from this protest was anticonscription, though it carried a far more radical opinion than the moderate reasoning of Logue. Reverend B. Gaffney presided over the demonstration and reiterated that, “it is not a political meeting, but a meeting where men of all shades of political opinion are asked to join hands and ward off a dreadful calamity that threatens our young men and old men, too.”<sup>103</sup> By articulating that it was not a political meeting, the reverend was breaking down any differences in political thought that the attendees might have had in the hopes that they could put up a unified front against conscription. This protest stressed the importance of the Catholic Church backing the anticonscription position. Moderate Nationalists and Republicans alike were largely Catholic and by breaking down these political barriers, the Catholic Church became a key factor in unifying public opinion in Ireland to protest conscription. In addition, by dictating that the meeting was not political, Gaffney confirmed that the Catholic stance to oppose conscription was on moral grounds. He added, “this war was started without our consent and without consulting the people of this country, besides our country has given more than its share of manpower...In justice, no nation under the sun can be compelled to make war against the will of the

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<sup>102</sup> “What was probably the largest,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 20, 1918.

<sup>103</sup> “What was probably the largest,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 20, 1918.

inhabitants, but that is what is going to be imposed on Ireland by conscription.”<sup>104</sup> The Irish volunteers who served for Britain did so of their own free will, as they supported the cause. However, the point that Gaffney was trying to make was that the act of conscripting the Irish against her will was an immoral action on the part of the British. No matter what political line of thought was taken, the action was still immoral in the eyes of the Catholic Church. The Reverend concluded, “When Irishmen, as a nation, with their own parliament, proclaim war, then you may depend you will have men able and willing to fight, and fight like genuine Irishmen—with all of their heart and will.”<sup>105</sup>

Other members of the Irish clergy confirmed the immorality of conscription in letters and protests. A letter from Reverend P. O’Connell read at the Cavan demonstration stated, “Our bishops declare the conscription of a nation without its consent to be unjustifiable, and...it is immoral, and, therefore resistance is a duty.”<sup>106</sup> Contrary to the British use of the word “duty” when debating conscription, Irish Catholics saw it as a duty to resist the immorality of conscription, whereas the British saw it as a duty as part of Britain to fight, even if unwillingly. Furthermore, the *Irish Independent* reported, “Further utterances by members of the Irish Hierarchy deal with the moral right of the Irish people to refuse conscription imposed by England, and their Lordships again assure their flock that bishops and priests will stand firmly beside them through the crisis.”<sup>107</sup> Finally, nearly ten days after Cardinal Logue’s original statement, he presided over a gathering of the bishops of Ireland. The meeting culminated with the release of a statement that proposed a unified resolution. It read,

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<sup>104</sup> “What was probably the largest,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 20, 1918.

<sup>105</sup> “What was probably the largest,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 20, 1918.

<sup>106</sup> “What was probably the largest,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 20, 1918.

<sup>107</sup> “Irish Hostility,” *Irish Independent*, April 18, 1918.

“In view especially of the historic relations between the two countries from the very beginning up to the present moment, we consider that conscription forced in this way upon Ireland is an oppressive and inhuman law, which the Irish people have a right to resist by all the means that are consonant with the law of God.”<sup>108</sup> This statement solidified Catholic resistance to conscription and as it was delineated to the parishes, encompassed a wider group of protesters across the country.

The Catholic Church, more than any other group in Ireland, was responsible for unifying Irish opinion against conscription and rallying people of different political backgrounds to come together in protest. Without the Catholic Church, the protests would not have been nearly as effective as they were. Contrastingly, in Britain, both opposition and support of Irish Conscription was confined to isolated groups and political parties, notably the Labour Party and working-class industrial centers such as Liverpool and Manchester. Although public opinion was in favor of extending conscription to the Irish, there was hardly a unified front like the one found in Ireland.

Other groups that figured to be instrumental in conscription protests were the labor unions that not only organized strikes and rallies, but also became some of the most radicalized of all objectors. Some, like the Donegal Flaxgrowers and Farmer’s Association, protested on the grounds that they needed all available men to grow food for the increased demand of the government, and conscription robbed them of workers needed to do this.<sup>109</sup> Others, such as the Irish Transport Workers, vowed to resist conscription “with all of their might” and predicted a successful protest because “in England the working classes put up a good fight against conscription, but they had not

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<sup>108</sup> “Irish Bishops Meet,” *Irish Independent*, April 19, 1918.

<sup>109</sup> “Irish People United,” *Irish Independent*, April 10, 1918.

sufficient backbone, but the Irish working classes would show when the time came that they had the backbone.”<sup>110</sup> The trade unions played a similar role as the Catholics in the Irish Conscription Crisis in that they helped to unify opposition.

In Ireland, the place that could have posed the biggest challenge to the anticonscription position was Ulster. As the Irish Conscription Crisis unfolded, it became clear that even in Ulster, with some exceptions, conscription was unpopular. The *Irish Independent* reported prior to the passage of the Military Service Act that, “even Ulster Unionists do not want conscription...Ulster is just as much against conscription as the rest of Ireland, and the government will be only courting disaster, and making Ireland still more an international question by forcing military service on this country.”<sup>111</sup> Unionists did not support the Nationalists’ claims to self-determination on which their anticonscription protest rested. Rather, conscription was unpopular in Ulster because the British Parliament had packaged it with a guarantee of Home Rule. A Belfast correspondent to the *Irish Independent* argued that, “if the Prime Minister had set himself the task of finding the likeliest means to create unrest in Ulster he could not have succeeded better than in his plan to link a Home Rule Parliament with conscription.”<sup>112</sup> Conscription was thus not the main issue for Ulster Unionists; the problem with the legislation was that Home Rule would have put Ulster at the mercy of a southern-dominated parliament. The Belfast correspondent added that in conversations with “men whose opinions matter” “all welcomed conscription, but they made it perfectly clear that they do not mean to go under a Dublin Parliament. Ulster’s

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<sup>110</sup> “Labour Opposition,” *Freeman’s Journal*, April 10, 1918.

<sup>111</sup> “Position in Ireland,” *Irish Independent*, April 6, 1918.

<sup>112</sup> “Press and the Crisis,” *Irish Independent*, April 12, 1918.

opposition to Home Rule would be infinitely more dangerous to the Empire than it would have been four years ago.”<sup>113</sup> This statement highlighted a key distinction between how the North viewed their relationship with Britain as opposed to the South. In Ulster, where British support was substantial, supporters of conscription felt that the British dishonored their loyalty by attaching Home Rule to conscription. This correspondent warned Britain thus not to take Ulster’s loyalism for granted, especially at a moment when the future of the British Empire lay in the balance.

In Ulster, Unionists vehemently opposed conscription because of the addendum of Home Rule on the bill. Sir Edward Carson, a firm advocate for conscription in all other instances, ironically voted against the Bill in Parliament. Carson maintained that, “the one thing I regret in this Bill is that the Government should have mixed up with it the question of Home Rule... No local Parliament that has ever been proposed has suggested, nor have hon. Members opposite ever suggested, that any local Parliament should undertake Imperial Defence... I warn the Government that they may be raising two agitations—one against Conscription and a second in regard to Home Rule—both of which may equally affect the operations of the Act which they have in mind. For my own part all I care about is that the country is in danger.”<sup>114</sup> This opposition to conscription packaged with Home Rule indeed led to massive protests in Ulster that used their antiseparatism as a mode of remonstrance at a time when the British government could scarce afford unrest on two fronts.

Many Unionists read the conscription bill as a broken promise that they would not have to endure the consequences of Home Rule. In protesting conscription

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<sup>113</sup> “Press and the Crisis,” *Irish Independent*, April 12, 1918.

<sup>114</sup> Hansard Parliamentary Debates, April 09, 1918, 5th ser., vol. 104, cols. 1364-449.

predominantly Protestant Ulsterites were actually resisting Home Rule and willing to sacrifice an Irish draft to uphold this principle. The *Freeman's Journal* argued that the Unionist press had solved the problem of their Loyalism “very ingeniously by declaring that, as Mr. Lloyd George has broken his pledges to Ulster by proposing to introduce a Home Rule Bill, Ulster is free to revise her pledges about conscription.”<sup>115</sup> The phrases “broken pledge” and “at the mercy of the south” are ever-present in the Unionist protests. Unionists felt betrayed by Britain’s addition of Home Rule to the bill as they were ever fearful of having to be subservient to a southern-dominated parliament. Hence their protests were not a protest of conscription per se; rather they were an attack on Home Rule and on Britain for reneging on her promises to Ulster.

That anticonscriptionism crossed political and religious lines should have further united the movement. At a meeting in Belfast an anti-conscription campaigner argued that, “the proposed coercive application to Ireland of conscription is contrary to the assurances and pledges of English Ministers, and is really a pretext to gain ulterior and sinister objects.”<sup>116</sup> He therefore suggested that Nationalists and Unionists unite against conscription.<sup>117</sup> Rather than presenting a unified front, the Conscription Crisis became an opportunity for Nationalists to call Unionists on what they construed as their conditional loyalty. “It is notorious that Unionist Ulster is as strongly opposed to conscription as any part of Ireland,” argued an article in the *Freeman's Journal*, an unconditionally Nationalist newspaper. “But the difficulty of the Carsonites is that they professed to welcome a measure which they heartily abhorred, and open opposition to it

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<sup>115</sup> “Ulster Tactics,” *Freeman's Journal*, April 18, 1918.

<sup>116</sup> “Action in Armagh,” *Freeman's Journal*, April 13, 1918.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*



now would reveal their former acceptance as no more than a piece of political trickery.”<sup>118</sup> In defense of the Unionists, the previous times conscription was considered, Home Rule was not attached to it. Nationalists, however, often accused of conditional loyalty themselves, couldn’t resist the opportunity to turn this rhetoric back on the Unionists. The *Journal* added, “Orangemen used to protest loudly against the charge of ‘conditional loyalty’ but...their ‘loyalty’ to the Empire at this crisis is conditional with a vengeance.”<sup>119</sup> Although the Conscription Crisis unified Ireland in protest, it was not enough to end the tensions between Nationalists and Unionists.

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<sup>118</sup> “Ulster Tactics,” *Freeman’s Journal*, April 18, 1918.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

## EPILOGUE

In the end, conscription was never enforced in Ireland. It is not clear whether or not the protests had any effect on the British decision to abandon Irish conscription, given the other factors at play. The British enjoyed a surge in troops due to the arrival of American forces at the front, the ground lost to Germany in the winter and spring of 1918 had been regained, and the overall outlook of the war was favorable to the Allies. The small number of Irish troops the British would have attained through conscription were thus no longer necessary.<sup>120</sup> However, merely the idea of conscription had sent Ireland into turmoil and had permanently changed the nature of Anglo-Irish politics. Indeed, the conscription crisis had many more implications for Ireland than it ever had for the war effort and led directly to the rise of Sinn Fein as the most powerful Nationalist party. By linking conscription with Home Rule, the concept of “Home Rule was permanently discredited, it was made clear that a Home Rule parliament would lack the power to decide what was literally a life and death issue for its constituents”<sup>121</sup> Given that Home Rule was no longer enough for Nationalists, the moderate IPP that had supported it also collapsed in the wake of the Conscription Crisis, losing almost all of its seats in the 1918 elections to Sinn Fein.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Gregory, 128.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

In the years that followed, violence erupted in the events of the Irish Revolution, the Anglo-Irish War, and the Irish Civil War as the Republican movement took over the southern counties and Ulster Unionists tried desperately to hold onto the United Kingdom. Ultimately, the southern counties separated and formed the Republic of Ireland and Ulster was sectioned off and renamed Northern Ireland, leading to further violence that haunted the rest of the twentieth century. The Conscription Crisis was not the most prominent event in the decade that featured other more watershed moments such as the Easter Rising, the Dublin Lockout, and the Anglo-Irish Treaty, but it did serve to expose the complexity of political factions within Ireland and the intricacy of their relationships with the British. The Conscription Crisis was a catalyst for the unification of the factionalized Nationalist movements in Ireland. Ultimately, it united the Nationalists under the Sinn Fein banner, put an end to the idea that Home Rule was sufficient, and led to the creation of a separate Irish state built along Republican lines.

The significance of the Conscription Crisis lies therefore not in the event itself but rather in its impact on Anglo-Irish relations in the aftermath of World War One. Conscription was never put into practice; the Crisis was thus only a response to a threat, though a very real one. However, the Conscription Crisis was not merely about conscription, and whether or not it was enacted was in the end of little consequence. By passing the Military Service Bill of 1918, the British had demonstrated that they had the right to legislate for the Irish without their consent. This proved to the Irish that they had little recourse to prevent or stop further British oppression, thus showing that Irish representation at Westminster was inconsequential. With political and diplomatic means of resolution debilitated, the Irish had very few options to ensure that their own

rights and liberties were safeguarded, hence the rise in Republicanism in the immediate post-war period. Most importantly, the Conscription Crisis confirmed that the Irish lacked the right to self-determination and proved that right would not be granted so long as Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom.

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